

# STEEP ASCENT

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JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

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STEEP ASCENT



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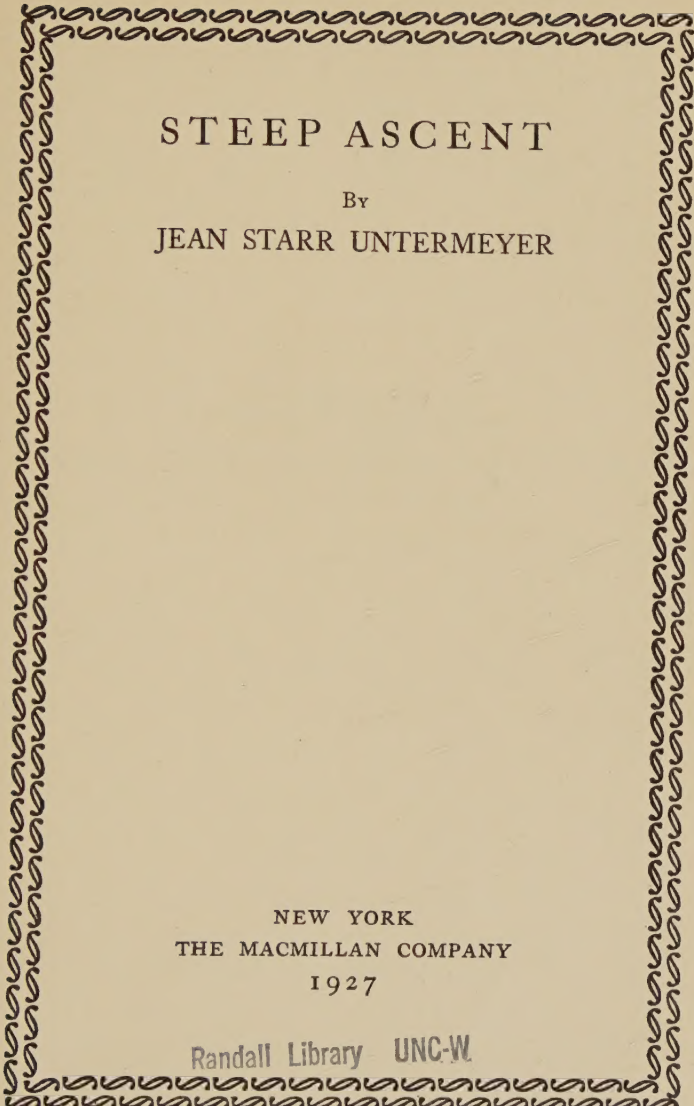
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# STEEP ASCENT

By

JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1927

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*TO MY SON*  
*THE EVER-LIVING RICHARD*



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STEEP ASCENT



I

*One Kind of Humility*

SHALL we say heaven is not heaven  
Since golden stairs are rugged and uneven?

Or that no light illuminates a star  
That swings in other regions than we are?

Deny with soured breath enduring God  
Because we cling so rankly to the sod?

No. Cleanse with weeping, fasting and with  
prayer.

Praise God. Look starward. Mount the stair!

## *Brief Ballad of Lilit*

LILITH was also beautiful  
As well as wicked and wise,  
And she could sit as mild as Eve  
And look down with dove's eyes.

And she could make her twisted tongue,  
Skilled in the Devil's book,  
Glide softly, softly over God's word,  
And could laugh like an innocent brook.

Never by candid blasphemies  
But by tears and half-checked sighs  
She snared the dreamer, Adam,  
And pressed him close to her thighs.

She tangled his hands in her gold-brown hair,  
Kissed his lips till his soul was leaden,  
And drew him into the Seven Hells  
While he thought he was still in Eden.



### *Old Man*

WHEN an old man walks with lowered  
head

And eyes that do not seem to see,  
I wonder does he ponder on  
The worm he was or is to be.

Or has he turned his gaze within,  
Lost to his own vicinity;  
Erecting in a doubtful dream  
Frail bridges to Infinity.

## *Undedicated*

**T**HE very sounding of her name  
Contracts my throat like searing flame,  
My heart beats heavy and too strong  
As hidden tears exalt her song,  
Her mind unchained, her racing blood  
That lifts a lyric like a flood.  
Gold trumpet she, but shoulder-flung,  
And put to lip, or thrown to dung  
By any lad whose vanity  
Hears in her lovely note his cry . . .  
But I'm a steel held scabbard-straight  
And tempered long against my fate.  
Oh, she may be the Horn of the Lord  
But I will be his Sword—his Sword!

## *Tone Picture*

(Malipiero: *Impressioni dal Vero*)

A<sup>CROSS</sup> the hot square, where the barbaric  
sun  
Pours coarse laughter on the crowds,  
Trumpets throw their loud nooses  
From corner to corner.  
Elephants, whose indifferent backs  
Heave with red lambrequins,  
Tigers with golden muzzles,  
Negresses, greased and turbaned in green and  
yellow,  
Weave and interweave in the merciless glare of  
noon.  
The sun flicks here and there like a throned  
tyrant,  
Snapping his whip.  
From amber platters, the smells ascend  
Of overripe peaches mingled with dust and  
heated oils.  
Pages in purple run madly about,  
Rolling their eyes and grinning with huge,  
frightened mouths.  
  
And from a high window—a square of black  
velvet—  
A haughty figure stands back in the shadow,  
Aloof and silent.

## *Birthday*

(For L——, *October First*)

NOW the beautiful business of summer is  
over,

Earth wraps herself in a bright, leaf-patterned  
shawl.

The hives cement the prodigal juice of the clover  
And spendthrift gold is hoarded in bin and stall.  
Beyond the wind-crisped hedge the corn-stalks  
hover;

The pumpkin lies by the wall.

October's the heir of the year, and you, my  
lover,

October's darling—the first to come at her call—  
May claim and hold what your wandering eyes  
discover

On jewelled hills that tempt a reluctant fall;  
Blest by the fired earth, while skies above her  
Spill golden peace over all.

## *Ballad for These Days*

“**O**<sup>H</sup> Mary, my wife, I wish I were dead,  
The hair lays so scanty atop of my head,  
And my teeth that could tackle a mallet of lead  
Sway a bit in my mouth as I crumble my  
bread.”

“See the curve of my vest that fell straight as  
the rain,  
And the hill to the barn sets me panting again,  
Me that hoisted a bullock unmindful of strain—  
Oh, it's hard, but I'd not have you think I was  
vain.”

“Hush ye now, Joseph,” said Mary his spouse,  
And her heart hurried her as she tidied the  
house,  
“What ye need, my dear man, is a little  
carouse.”  
And she kissed out the wrinkle that slanted his  
brows.

“Why, look you, we're married now near  
twenty years,  
We've had laughter a-plenty and labor and  
tears,  
But to me you are shining for all of your fears.  
And don't be forgetting our children, the dears.”



“Why wish yourself dead that you’re not a  
young lad;  
Say a prayer to the saints for the joys that  
you’ve had.  
Take a walk in the wood now—and don’t come  
back sad”—  
Said Mary, and crossed herself lest she go  
mad.

So Joseph betook him to walk in the wood  
And returned to his home in an altered mood.  
“Oh I think,” he said slyly, “my trot did me  
good,  
For my health I must go there each day—that  
I should.”

One day with belligerent hands clasped behind—  
“See here now, my woman, ye must be half-  
blind  
If you can’t see,” he said, “though I won’t be  
unkind,  
That I find you no longer so much to my mind.”

“In fact now, in mid of the wood by the oak  
A spry maid awaits—of the elfin folk—  
She’s my daughter and lover in one—that’s the  
joke—  
So ye see, my dear Missus, I’m off with the  
yoke.”

“You’re a biddable body—and fine ye are too  
There’ll be steadier men for the likes of you.  
A bold brat I am, and a bit askew  
You’ve the children and farm—so, my dear,  
adieu.”

And Joseph walked off with a sidling tread.  
He stopped at the well and he turned at the  
shed.  
Then he gave a wild toss to his graying head—  
Mary wept and she wished to herself she were  
dead.

Mary sat there awhile in her kitchen so drear.  
“He looks older by far than yesteryear.  
Nasty darling he is”—and she banished a tear.  
“There’s the supper to get”—and that’s life,  
my dear.

*Plain Statement*

**H**ERE 's the matter, stark and bland,  
Unbejewelled by words or phrases  
Open-faced as meadowland  
Pied with daisies.

You may stay or you may roam  
Circlewise in sinful mazes  
I will still contain your home,  
Meed your praises.

*Out of the Mouths of Babes*

“OH the rain,” said Dickie, looking out  
On a summer tempest’s slaughter  
“Oh the rain,” he said with a baby pout,  
“Is a little piece of the water.”

“And the cloud,” he chanted with quickening  
pulse,  
“Is a little piece of the sky.  
Everything’s pieces of something else.  
What kind of a piece am I?”

He fronted this riddle with infant guile  
And then, with a sage little nod,  
He answered himself with his liquid smile,  
“I’m a little piece of God.”

## *Gulls*

**T**HE sun was shining so upon the river,  
That scattered ice-floes swaying on the  
water  
Seemed winter-lilies, opened and inviting  
Gulls to their slumber.

But gulls were circling in a nervous pattern,  
Impelled by something other than the morning,  
Searching with darting eye and balanced pinion,  
Wanting no Lethe.



## *Nature Cure*

**T**ELL it again in stronger tones  
And make your meaning plain;  
White cliff, that stabs the water's side  
Without the crease of pain.

You gallant maple, teasing birch,  
And ruffled, stately pine,  
There is a sturdy sap in you—  
Share it, let it be mine.

Resistless grass, to every wind  
And every scuffling tread,  
You yield and bend a patient back.  
So let me bow my head.

And you, dear lake, whose candid gaze  
Resists my importunate soul,  
You hide a secret in your depths—  
Deliver it to me whole.

Invite me in and let me work  
In that great pattern, planned  
In beauty I must kneel before  
But cannot understand.

*Spring Night at Lachaise's*

S H Y L Y and slowly and softly,  
Exultant and trembling our faces,  
We moved from that room down the stairway—  
A cortège to Beauty;

To Beauty enslaved of two masters,  
For were not the wide curving bronzes  
Cryptic and poised, unexcessive—  
Her own body captured?

And under the dark window's archway,  
A maple's impulsive young branches,  
Screening the tenement's squalor—  
Her very gesture!

## *Analogy*

**S**CARCE four summer suns have gilded his  
curls,  
But with full-grown purpose he runs and hurls  
His tiny bulk against her inattentive knee,  
And beats on her breast insistently.

I see her draw herself back from her dreams,  
Bewildered, half-resentful, while he screams  
His urgencies in sharp, discovering cries.  
She harkens with dull ears, half-seeing eyes.

You, too, beat loudly on my dreams, my son.  
My dreams are frail—yours robust, finely spun.  
But beat on.—Rain your clamoring thoughts  
on me.  
Prod me to life again. Help me to see.

*Song of an Ordinary Woman*

OH let it be the night again  
And me in your embrace,  
And my face held slanting  
Against your face.  
Then silent lips and fingers  
The willing homage pay  
That at proud noon, ungraciously,  
They would not say.  
And once again you'll raise me  
In my own self-esteem,  
And confidently lead me  
Into my favorite dream  
Where I shall be a princess  
And not this plodding clay . . .

Oh let it be the night again,  
Banish the day!

*Afterthoughts on Reading Some Modern  
Poetry*

*Distorted*

**H**ow they affront the sweet simplicity of love  
Who, with the affectation of a phrase  
awry,  
Caricature his noble symmetry.

*Arid*

**J**UGGLE with language as you will  
And mime the living torments of your peers;  
Though calculated pathos points your skill,  
No selfless pity salts these wordy tears.

### *Steeled*

**F**ROWN at me, Winter, if you will  
And knit your stormy brows,  
Across that crimson western hill  
Send your bitter snows.  
Since I have seen your crystal stars  
Through dark and feathery boughs,  
And stood a stranger unafraid  
Outside the lighted house.

Alone and stark, yet at my heart  
In the breathless, icy night  
A timid faith and shy to start  
Into an ardour grows.  
I know that Spring prepares the green,  
Though earth is frozen tight,  
Where stung and steeled with ecstasy  
I shall renew the fight.

## II

### *White Armour*

**D**EMAND no bay or laurel now  
To wrap about thy lifted brow,

But as the fated hour nears,  
Accept a chaplet of my tears.

And this, to clasp thy traveller's hood,  
The ruby of my frozen blood.

As mantle for thy wayward breast  
My weakness will, I think, be best.

My strength, thy staff that does not bend,  
Will serve to slay me at the end.

My night and morning prayers to God,  
Twin sandals wherewith thou art shod.

My love—which bends before His Wrath,  
Sweet grass to ease thy stony path.

*At Sea*

*(For Sara Teasdale)*

LONELIER than gulls and wilder is the  
heart

That from a throbbing deck observes their  
flight,

Touching with aching thought the one apart,  
Choked in a mist, caught in a nameless fright.

Not free as they nor brave as they to fly,  
Unwelcome in the one heart that is home,  
That hardly lives and does not dare to die,  
Lost in these tides as the unconsidered foam.



*Two and One*

**T**wo loved him and clove to his side;  
And two there were who died.

One to the desperate river fled,  
Stark with weeping and laid her head  
On its dark lethal bed.

The other, with shaking hand instead,  
And a severed heart that bled and bled,  
Passed him with smiles his daily bread.

One died living;  
One died dead.

*Reply from the Citadel*

N E V E R will a wordy noose  
My love snare, his mind confuse.

Nor the neatest flatteries  
Win him from his verities.

Call him Roman that you seek,  
Slim Castilian, Teuton, Greek,

Yourself your very phrases mock;  
He was ripped from Sinai's rock.

Of the Chosen, he is free  
For responsibility;

Called to honor, picked by fate,  
Unified, inviolate.

Though he stray within a dream,  
Judge no man by what he seem.

At the last he will be first,  
Unreproached and unaccursed.

And no pagan theory  
Injures his fidelity.

Though he toss upon your breast,  
In my thought he finds his rest.

Though you make his passions start,  
I give him the better part.

All his noblest strivings live  
By the succor I can give.

Wait, strange woman, you will see  
He has never gone from me.

Ours a race whose laws on stone  
Burn into our flesh and bone;

Purify and prod and prove  
Faithful both to God and love.

*Another Way*

NOT by bright, borrowed radiance of a name  
Would I prod your attention, nor to please,  
Snatch from dead Juliet her garnished fame,  
Nor liken to mine own the bended knees  
Of pious Beatrice. By laying claim  
To Cleopatra's passion or the frame  
Of restless Sappho—could I thus appease  
My yearning—or your love inflame  
By donning the dropped robe of Héloïse?

I am not like these ladies. They are dead,  
Gilded by time and set apart and proved.  
Wherefore, since having lived and having loved  
And died of loving, all their tale is said.  
From my taut anguish springs the braver deed  
That I am born again to my love's need.

### *Slave-Song*

THEY told me love was a prison,  
A strait and airless room,  
Where my spirit beat a fevered wing  
Against a chosen doom.

They said that love was a tyrant,  
That I had been beaten by whips,  
That your veering moods rocked my tethered  
soul  
As a veering wind rocks ships.

But what to me is freedom  
And this chilly, chartless space  
That lacks the gusty breath of your love  
And the lodestar of your face?

## *Miracle*

SHALL a miracle rain again from the skies  
And a battering truth split old doubt  
asunder?

Shall an Eden spring from a grave of lies  
And a new dawn blaze into shattering wonder?  
Shall the heart betrayed  
Slay the mind afraid  
And from pain, stripped hearts bear a shining  
plunder?

"Yes, yes," cries the heart, "let the miracle be  
Whose wings vibrate through my dreams like  
thunder.

From the depths where I drown there can rescue  
me

Only the hands that have beat me under.

Come, oh hands delayed

Lift the heart afraid!

Claim your quivering love where you always  
shunned her."

## *Rainy Night*

**T**HE dusk came cold and gray that night;  
Because 'twas summer, it seemed colder.  
A ropy rain swung toward the pane,  
And, when the evening wind grew bolder,  
Ground with a sinister sound on the glass,  
As the light faded out.

And you lay in that waning light.  
A peaceful pallor that made you older,  
Slowly crept o'er your face as you slept.  
A chill wind blew on my slanted shoulder  
That bent like a tent shielding you—but alas!  
All my joy faded out.

Though I could touch you with my hand,  
Though I could press my mouth to yours,  
Your soul was in another land,  
Your lips resistant to my cures.

Your parted fingers never moved,  
Although I warmed them with my breath,  
And all of you that I so loved  
Seemed frozen to me—as in death.

Aghast, I woke you with my cries  
And sought life in your lifeless arms;  
I looked into your misty eyes  
That questioned me of my alarms.

With fright I pressed you close to me,  
And knew then, with relentless pain,  
Bereft of you my life would be  
A chill night in merciless rain.



### *Bad Weather*

**I**T is a white world now as it was then;  
But now a fury rages in its pain.  
And then the ground on which we stood  
Was lyric as our mood.

Midnight and snow a hard wind drives and  
steers  
As we are driven by determined years;  
But then the snow was daisy fields June  
spread—  
Sheets for our bridal bed.

How Nature cheats us in all weathers  
Robs us of selfhood. Then when we have  
sinned  
For the brief heaven of being together,  
Drives us like snow before the wind.

*Spent*

OH the night, the night,  
When I bludgeon my heart with God  
And the blood in its fervent race  
Cools and cowers before the Word.

Oh the fight, the fight  
Not to lay me under the sod,  
Till the dawn not as blanched as my face  
Answers faith with a faithful bird.

I must follow the steadfast sun  
Up the hill where his shadow fell;  
Never lag till a hope is won  
By his certain miracle.

Lo, I stand on the peak of noon.  
Let the night come—not—too—soon.

## *Rescue*

WIND and wave and the swinging rope  
Were calling me last night;  
None to save and little hope,  
No inner light.

Each snarling lash of the stormy sea  
Curled like a hungry tongue.  
One desperate splash—and no use to me,  
The noose that swung!

Death reached out three crooked claws  
To still my clamoring pain.  
I wheeled about, and Life's gray jaws  
Grinned once again.

To sea I gazed, and then I turned  
Stricken toward the shore,  
Praying half-crazed to a moon that burned  
Above your door.

And at your door, you discovered me;  
And at your heart I sobbed . . .  
And if there be more of eternity,  
Let me be robbed.

Let me be clipped of that heritage  
And burned for ages through;  
Freed and stripped of my fear and rage—  
But not of you.

*Bitter Bread and Weak Wine*

I HAVE tasted of Sorrow,  
I have eaten her whole,  
And her bitter marrow  
Has fed my sick soul.

With hunger abated,  
Desireless I sup,  
And drink unrelated  
From Joy's tilted cup.

Can such listless quaffing  
From waters so mild,  
Restore me to laughing  
And the faith of a child?

*From the Brink*

My life has crumpled about my feet,  
My high boasts shredded, my hope  
brought low,  
And I that ran after truth so fleet,  
Fall back from her bitter face too slow.

For if this is truth—this that you say  
That you love me no more—then give me lies,  
Beautiful falsehoods to ease my way;  
Tempt me to live with candid eyes.

My clean straight pride in my soul is gone;  
I builded my house on a sinking stone.  
Give me lies, give me lies to help me on,  
Else I must lie in the grave alone;

And leave you to lie in other arms  
That twine more lightly, but love you less,  
Not braced as mine to scatter harms  
And cradle you in love's holiness.

If our love was a lie, then the sun is false  
And the moon a treachery silvered in sin,  
And God is a mumbling ghoul—what else?—  
Mocking us over a dead world's din.

### *Self-Rejected*

**P**L O W not nor plant this arid mound:  
Here is no sap for seed,  
No ferment for your need—  
Ungrateful ground!

No sun can warm this spot  
God has forgot;  
No rains can penetrate  
Its barren slate.

Demonic winds blow last year's stubble  
From its hard slope.  
Go, leave the hopeless without hope;  
Spare your trouble.

## *Catharsis*

**T**IS true she was rejected and cast out  
By her own self upon a barren hill,  
Where sun-rays seared and where rains beat  
until  
She writhed and panted as beneath a knout.  
And when her pain had wrung a final shout,  
She lay there broken and was very still,  
Vised in an agony beyond her skill  
To ease or heighten—or to think about.

But with her demons flayed, her sins unhoused,  
She was a vessel whose transparence showed  
Within its depths a struggling flame that roused  
Itself by endless striving, till it glowed  
Within her proudest gesture, humblest mood,  
And purified the ground on which she stood.

### III

#### *Sung on a Sunny Morning*

O<sup>H</sup> holy cause  
That points the grass  
And lifts the flower,  
That gives to rain  
And slanting grain  
And sun just dower,  
Confirm your laws!  
Ever flood  
My sweetened blood  
With lenient power.  
Keep me free  
Eternally  
As in this hour.



*According to Scripture*

**N**ow are my vitals strapped and held together

By a strong, uplifting noose;  
A surcingle not made of leather  
That bound the scattering Jews;

That belted them when they would run or falter  
Like quivering stallions, battle-scared,  
Herded in that heavenly halter,  
They broke through fear and dared

The blasts that bellowed hate from heathen  
towers,  
The throaty taunts, the gritty, jeering calls,  
The scourge that rattled down in rocky showers  
From every nation's walls;

Nor died when pogroms issued from the royal  
feather,  
Erasing flesh from the green page of earth,  
For still the arc that edged the rainy weather  
Upheld the spirit in rebirth.

Oh did a spell of faith their stuff embolden  
And burst in singing even while they bled?  
Leave it me, Lord—it shall be holden  
Dearer than daily bread.

*Yonder Lebanon*

LET us go, slow, slow, as though we paced the  
dead  
We seem to follow funerals—we crowd on life  
instead.

With a mien, serene, our hope is like a rod,  
As we pick the careful footsteps that unwind  
the way to God.

Let our foes repose or whip their weapons out,  
We will ease their sick surrender at the final  
rout.

Mercy-girt, unhurt, we have breasted the red  
sea.  
From that frothing, fresh delivered, shall we  
doubt our Victory?

## *Midnight Vision*

**A**SILVER wind flew by our house  
And where it flew I do not know.  
But I saw my youth ride by in its hair,  
My youth all poised with slender wing  
And a crimson heart that burned for life.

A crimson heart that burned for life  
Far more than it could yearn for Heaven;  
A crimson heart that burned for life  
Far more than it could strive for Art.

And yet I know that heart is shrouded  
In a milky veil of a dream of Heaven;  
And yet I know that heart is locked  
In a steely armor forged for Art.

But how do I know I shall surely die  
Unless I run with fleetest foot  
And bring me back my crimson heart,  
My dauntless heart that burned for life  
Far more than it could yearn for Art  
And more than it could burn for Heaven?

*Mater in Extremis*

I STAND between them and the outer winds,  
But I am a crumbling wall.  
They told me they could bear the blast alone,  
They told me: that was all.  
But I must wedge myself between  
Them and the first snowfall.

Riddled am I by onslaughts and attacks  
I thought I could forestall;  
I reared and braced myself to shelter them  
Before I heard them call.  
I cry them, God, a better shield!  
I am about to fall.

### *Last Plea*

OH God, let me be beautiful in death,  
Lend me, one moment in Eternity, your  
making hand.

Oh let the leaping spirals of my breath  
Droop over me and hide  
My bitten heart, my scarréd side;  
Let me walk proud and lovely from the land.

Have I mis-read the Law? Then give me sight.  
Spare me, this awful once, the fumbling pattern  
of the blind.

Untether my impatience. In the night  
Lean down in secret and retrace  
Your symmetry upon my face;  
Ballast by your bright strength my failing  
might.

## *Reproved*

**H**ow could I to the counterfeit of sense  
Lend, moment's-length, the credence of an  
eye?

How honor the presentment of a lie  
With honorable query, "Wherefore—whence?"  
How lack the authoritative teller's, "Hence  
From this firm portal evermore, nor try,  
Imp-like, to jeopardize our solvency  
By splintered fractions of rejected pence."

For we are vaulted here and we are barred  
By strength outlived of iron and of stone,  
Since our depositors are booked and starred  
And we deliver to their need alone  
Who claim identity and ever prove  
The dear, undoubted signature of love.

## *White Road*

WILL the way stretch white before us, forever  
Up-hill, down-hill, and always the lights beyond,  
Through wintry woods with thin blue shadows  
pointing—  
Over the sands in Maine with the moon for  
friend?

Will the way be white? Are the shadows behind us,  
Lost and left in the past, in the forest of gloom?  
That night of snow was a sign. I have dreamed  
the others.  
Walk with me now on a broad white path to  
the end.

*They Say—*

**T**HEY say I have a constant heart, who know  
Not anything of how it turns and yields  
First here, first there; nor how in separate  
fields

It runs to reap and then remains to sow.  
How, with quick worship, it will bend and glow  
Before a line of song, an antique vase,  
Evening at sea; or in a well-loved face  
Seek and find all that Beauty can bestow.

Yet they do well who name it with a name,  
For all its rash surrenders call it true.  
Though many lamps be lit, yet flame is flame;  
The sun can show the way, a candle too.  
The tribute to each fragment is the same  
Service to all of Beauty—and her due.



*Injunction*

MIX the lyric water  
Of the movement that is song  
With the sandy stuff of thought,  
So that something may be wrought  
Concrete from the flux of pain,  
Some small monument remain  
Of her, who was Job's own daughter,  
Unterrestrial and strong.

### *Ancient Riddle*

**I** CRIED for stone to hack and hew . . .  
But I am the rock and the chisel, too.

I am the strength within the stroke  
And the vein where the marble chipped and  
broke.

I am the figure long designed  
And I the pulse of the planning mind.

And I the chaotic space between  
The plan conceived and the pattern seen;

The battle ground and the battle-cry,  
Victor and victim, I against I.

### *Postscript to the Belovéd*

*S*INCE my poems blossom when you move  
Or burst from me beneath the rod,  
I dedicate them half to love  
And half to God.

*Yet, lest it seem a paradox  
To separate what's one in two,  
I leave them, being orthodox,  
To you.*















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